Organisations as soap-opera : leading change and continuity through narrative-based OD

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Introduction

In this chapter we reflect on our experience as organisation development consultants to a multinational merger in which the overriding challenge was to sustain continuity through a series of potentially disruptive changes. Our approach was informed by an appreciation of narrative aspects of organising, on the basis of which we designed and implemented a series of interventions based on dramaturgical forms that we thought best suited the emerging leadership task of storytelling, drawing on norms from cinema, theatre and TV. In this chapter we focus on just one of these interventions, which we describe here in brief vignettes and follow with a more extended explanation of our thinking and its implications for wider application. We hope this demonstrates how working with narrative as a metaphor has helped leaders – individually and collectively – reframe their understanding and redirect their action. The period in question (1999 to 2002) represents one merger episode in an ongoing 15-year serial of renaming and repositioning. This episodic unfolding of events led us to choose soap opera as the metaphor which is most helpful in understanding the practice of leading continuity.

Story in search of narrative

The merger aimed to bring together three companies with different national and organisational cultures and also three quite distinct products and processes. The plotline for this episode was described as a conventional HR story about 'finding synergies'. This meant HR must:

1. construct the story around the deal logic, lending energy and drive to company leadership;

2. convince shareholders and make the story clear for all key players in 60 days;

3. find savings, create a budget that everyone could strive for and keep to the timetable;

4. reap HR synergies, spot departees and avoid a talent drain, managerial paralysis and a deflated middle layer;

5. make a team of the survivors and provide a programme for motivation.

The narrative arc foresaw that everything would be fine in the end. This narrative formula plots a linear route through tension, crisis and denouement to inevitable resolution: it is a formular that often characterises corporate strategies and change programmes, usually conceived as time-limited productions.

Our involvement in the project began when information about the merger was held only by the top teams in the three companies involved. This would be the third merger in five years for one of these companies so there were fears that the news would cause chaos. Understandably, the HR director questioned the value of a conventional change management approach, which would have boiled down to creating a supposedly shared vision followed by a programme of events aimed at selecting the best plant, people and processes and leaving the rest. He wanted to explore and value the differences in the merging companies rather than apply a veneer of uniformity. He believed that it is not difference which causes conflict but the attempt to force diverse organisations into a one- size-fits-all template (Deering & Murphy, 1998). For example, he wanted to avoid solely financial and numerical evaluations, which risk making everything and everyone flat.

We identified two themes to be narrated, which are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. *Analytic and energising themes required in the narrative about the prospective merger*

Analysing the deal

What's the relationship for?

What's the balance of trade? How will we fare?

Where are the synergies?

Where is the value currently delivered? Will we (I) survive?

The vision meeting: From plot to narrative

Energising the story

What is the story we want the world to hear?

How can people in both companies tell their own stories?

How well do we appreciate what works in each company?

How do we connect the right people?

How do we discover who the right people are?

The top 60 or so members of the three companies held an event to work out what the merger would look like and what they wanted it to mean. A journalist was to help them write a new story. Everyone wrote 'newspaper' stories about communicating the merger to the outside world. They followed this with an exercise saying how it would all end.

The stories revealed much common ground among the three companies: innovation would be key, each would take pride in the heritage of their own part of the company, customers would be delighted with the outcome and strong, decisive leaders would impose a strict financial discipline. However, only one character was mentioned in the 120 stories: the new CEO. There was no exploration to capture the narrative interests of shareholders, employees and customers, and the themes were not woven

into the story itself. Furthermore, not a single person had attended to the narrative itself – to how the story was to be told.

Exposing this 'missing narrative' brought about a shift in direction – rather than focusing only on *outcomes*, they began to look at actual *practice*.

Transition and integration: Multiplying plotlines

Following the vision meeting, the transition team decided to concentrate on elements they felt would bring innovation and breakthrough: character traits such as pride and heritage; customer delight; strong, decisive leadership; and exploiting difference. They also wanted to avoid the downward spiral they knew could take hold through a 'shadow' story: that everyone's future was dependent on one man, key customers could exit, a

cash crisis loom and soon the story could deteriorate into one of paralysis, turf battles, a talent drain, inertia and alienation. Which story would dominate?

Once the merger was made public the grapevine became a vibrant medium. Town hall meetings were convened – but they focused on telling the official story and not what was happening to people. The transition teams realised the need to find out what these stories were and to allow differences to be heard. Listening came to the fore as a leadership practice.

Never-ending stories: Coherence beyond conformity

We found ourselves in search of a narrative form with more similarities to the realities of organisational life and adapted Mumford's definition of soap opera:

An organisation [soap opera] is a continuing [fictional] dramatic [television] programme, presented in multiple serial instalments each week, through a narrative composed of interlocking storylines that focus on the relationships within a specific community of characters.

(Adapted from Mumford, 1995, p. 18)

The parallels seemed plausible enough to consider what, if anything, soaps could illuminate about the merger. The aim was to draw out richer *descriptions* of leadership and *prescriptive* advice on how to lead continuity.

Soap opera forms and norms

Soap operas are never-ending. They do not work towards a final climax and closure – each apparent climax (such as a wedding) prompts events that propel the plot into a new theme (in-laws fight, the bride's ex-lover turns up, and so on). In this way, they are much like big events in organisational life: the opening of a new facility, winning a big contract or hiring a new CEO are all much anticipated and a common focus for hopes and anxieties. But they seldom turn out to be catastrophic or truly transformational; they are another episode in the ongoing life of the organisation. The way in which soap operas subvert and contextualise climactic events alerts us to the wider narrative in which organisations exist. Soap opera audiences are always being projected into the future via expectations aroused by long familiarity with the characters, the ability to see the convergence of events from different parts of the plot, and the breaks between episodes, which provide opportunities for speculation and anticipation. These three features that punctuate the 'soap never-endingness' also characterise life in organisations.

They are daily occurrences. Soaps are produced on a relentless daily schedule which requires discipline by all involved. It also makes it impossible for producers to police them in the way they can a stage play or short tele-drama. Actors can discover new nuances of character and new vectors in the plot, but must stay within the bounds of a coherent aesthetic (Nochimson, 1992). Similarly, work organisations exist with relentless daily

regularity, and require members to act within a common aesthetic.

Multiple plots develop simultaneously. The existence of several plot lines adds to the flexibility of soaps and constructs a tension as we see events unfolding in parallel, sometimes converging towards an anticipated crisis. In the same way, members of work organisations are aware of events unfolding in different spheres, both inside the firm and in its relations with customers, regulators, competitors, and so on. Organisational members are inescapably caught up in multiple plot lines. Those at the top ask those below to focus on the most important tasks for organisational success but are themselves inevitably

caught up in sub-plots – some with alternative strategies and possible deals but also political

154

moves to secure their own position and alliances that have only tangential impact on the official storyline.

Unfolding text. Although the plots of soap operas are written in advance of their performance and producers decide on themes to bring to the foreground over a given period (drug addiction, domestic violence, and so on), they are subject to a level of improvisation as episodes are recorded. More important, though, is the way storylines and characters develop over time and provide part of the social context. People who don't follow the same soap can't join in the conversation. The same can be said for 'shop talk' in and about organisations. Organisational members are committed audiences as well as actors.

Cliffhangers and teasers. Any story with episodes has the opportunity to keep people hanging on to see what will happen. The same goes when the outcome is in the hands of one group of characters: one never quite knows what the other parties will do. These features contribute an emotional force to the continuity of the narrative, a frisson that makes it intriguing to see what happens next. Similarly, the fun of being part of a new initiative in an organisation is to see what it will stir up.

Central core of characters – about 20. This is a significant feature of soaps – there seem to be very few people involved and endless extraordinary permutations of what they can
get up to together. People in work organisations relate regularly to a relatively small number of colleagues or customers, and find their place in the whole through membership of a particular sub-set of characters.

In both work organisations and soaps, individual characters are expendable. However central key people seem, they can disappear abruptly and, in spite of the turbulence this may cause, it rarely stops the flow altogether. An important feature of soap opera communities is that death can come at any moment. This occurs when an actor becomes ill, or pushes too hard in negotiating higher fees. Producers can simply switch

attention to a subsidiary plot line – another feature that has implications for flexibility in firms.

155

Imperfect characters. Because in soaps we get to see characters over many years in several situations, we can see how the qualities that make them fail in some circumstances prove to be strengths in others – a violent husband is seen to be an effective and focused manager. In organisational life we seldom see all sides of a person, yet we know they exist. Many companies have tried to spell out a list of characteristics that they require in their employees – so-called behavioural values or competence frameworks – only to be frustrated to find that some people can be emotionally/socially inept but high achievers.

The value of brand identification. Soap operas are commercial enterprises sustained by attracting viewers, winning their trust, and transferring that trust to sponsors and advertisers. Brand identity and customer loyalty is so crucial to their commercial viability that producers will mess around with it only reluctantly. But everyone wants a bigger share of the market and to reduce unit costs, so there are the same pressures for consolidation as in other sectors.

Companies that own and manage consumer brands are adept at buying and selling them without damaging customer loyalty. Public and private sector reorganisations, as departments are merged and split, put huge pressure on leaders to maintain loyalty and commitment, encouraging people to associate their professional identity with a particular set of tangible outcomes, rather than membership of a long-established service. This is especially difficult where history and tradition form a strong part of the benefits of membership.

Implications for leadership in mergers and more generally

Seek repetition and regularity as well as change

Although change happens all the time, it does so within continuing sets of relationships. Many things remain the same and are confirmed by familiar patterns of interaction. After pay negotiations, management and employees continue to work together; competitors go on trading in the same markets

after the anti-trust dispute is settled; the flight crew still depend on the dispatchers after the reorganisation. Competition and cost-cutting drive

innovation and change, and change is actually effected through people. We need to view changes as permutations and adaptations rather than radical discontinuities.

In a merger this means making space for others to tell how it is for them. For this, they may engage in an honest appraisal of existing senior management preferences, attributes and characteristics from the merging companies rather than uniform competence-based descriptions of what they 'should be'. Top managers need to discover together what effective leadership means in and for the new company, which means listening to the different stories people tell. It is important to remember that a 'soap' is a serial and you can't show all the themes in the first episode.

Explore plot and character developments

Find out how those involved see events unfolding and the options for how the 'plot' might develop. What shifts in character would have to take place? How can you help 'actors' discover these possibilities in the way they enact their roles? Almost everyone can see opportunities for development both for themselves and the business. Major reorganisations become manageable when people see how their 'character' fits in.

In a merger, it is important to translate the strategy (the themes), actions and processes (the plot) into the competencies needed to cast the right characters (for example, speed and decisiveness, the capacity to hear, building commitment and energy, self-awareness, and so on). This 'casting' exercise usually evokes intra-organisational politics,

and the narrative can become gridlocked if politics gets the upper hand. Often the story really begins *to be told* during the selection meeting because only then can the characters become real in the selectors' imagination. Focusing on output (the effect required in both technical and human dimensions) rather than input (detailed, behavioural descriptions) can be helpful.

Respect conversational opportunities for gossip, speculation, fantasy and anticipation

157

These reveal the pleasure that people find in the characterisations they have given themselves and others. Gossip is often about matters of questionable ethics, even at its most scurrilous. Gossip and idle speculation can also be damaging, especially when it concerns confidential information. Leaders are much less at liberty to express their personal opinions of other people. Too much gossip can be annoying but, if nothing else, it is an indication of the need for clearer communications from the top.

Acknowledge the value of empathy and partiality

Impartiality and fairness are recognised as crucial to a sense of justice and trust. But the soap opera metaphor helps us to see how problematic this can be – both difficult to attain and not entirely true to reality. Organisations strive for impartiality by establishing formal rules and procedures but everyone knows that sometimes good people are penalised and scoundrels get away with mischief. The leadership challenge is to shape a story in the face of multiple and often contradictory positions.

Recognise the pleasure of resistance

There is a tendency to treat resistance to change as pathological – a symptom of weakness in the resistor and an obstruction to the march of progress. But soap audiences derive great pleasure from the simple act of resisting the hum-drum obligations of everyday life.

'Resistance' in organisational life – especially 'reorganisations' – may arise partly because it is a way to claim one's own agency. Accepting a certain amount of resistance is to acknowledge the ongoing needs of the less powerful. Change programmes – including mergers – may be forcibly pushed through, but resistance and small victories always appear in the subplots and especially in subsequent integration of the merged entities.

Change management should be able to tolerate some pleasurable resistance, and subsequent post-merger leadership development could enhance the capacity for this.

Organise big events but don't expect them to mean the same to everyone and watch out for the 'off-stage' sub-plots that may attract more attention than the official programme. While the organisers of a big corporate conference are focused on getting their messages right, the real action may be in the bar.

Integration meetings designed to send a single message can sink into a one-way broadcast. Audiences do not just receive meaning, they make it. It is therefore important to organise events making sure that personal stories are not 'wrong' but are a legitimate part of the company story. Have leaders tell and hear the stories and make spaces for people to do so for themselves. They need to find, connect and celebrate the best of what the company does and can achieve. As the merger story unfolds everyone will have to discover what the new company means.

Live within the ethos of the organisation

Just as each soap opera has its own unique atmosphere and following, every organisation has its own character. Even companies in the same industry, employing similar people, are quite distinct. Any leader who fails to represent the shared identity of the company will be alienated. This is partly a case of 'know your audience' and also a recognition that your audience knows you!

Leadership development programmes designed to acknowledge and nurture continuity look quite different from ones focused on change. Rather than stressing the importance of pre- agreed competencies, they focus on learning from each other's management in practice in situ in the merging companies. They enable leaders to observe the new company and continue to provide opportunities to meet across boundaries to hear and tell stories. Comparing notes, learning from each other, and exploring differences and common ground builds collegiality. In our example, leaders from each of the three merging companies visited and shadowed a peer from one of the other companies, learned about business operations and cultures, and contributed ideas towards the merger. These 'leadership

exchanges' (Gosling & Western, 2017) started with the four executive directors, extended to the twelve

ex-com members, and then to their 100 direct reports. An acknowledged outcome was an appreciation of different meanings of the merger: for some it was an exciting opportunity to stretch and a bold recognition of industry trends; to others it was a logical corporate manoeuvre in the interests of shareholders. The 'leadership exchange' enabled people to recognise both stories by seeing how each made sense in different parts of the merged business.

Control the theme, encourage the characters to develop and don't lose the plot

In summary, leaders can use a 'misty vision' to articulate the theme that is most important at any particular time. Often organisations go through phases such as cost-cutting, customer focus, operating efficiency and integrity. If cost-cutting is the main theme, everything is tied into it – even a major capital investment is lauded for its greater efficiency, while during a 'customer focus' theme, expenditure will be justified by its market sensitivity.

Meanwhile, leaders cannot control what talented people do but they can help them to play out their roles in accord with the ethos and theme. And while the plot unfolds, it is often a leader's job to spell out the emerging story (though there are likely to be many versions of the same events!).

Managing the plot in the context of a merger can put significant pressure on everyone. There are tough decisions to take and not all characters will have a job in the end. Focusing on the story, however, enables things to be done differently. Table 2 summarises the actions and process for doing this.

Table 2. *Tips for a story-based approach to managing a merger process*

What?

Identify key
opinion *shapers* and use them.

Spot the *departees* fast.

How?

Find out what's in it for them and give them a role.

Hear the stories: how will they make a difference?

And not ... fielding rumours.

talking to people in a way which has them feel cross- examined and forced to re-

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Identify and retain
key *talent* (individuals and teams).
Motivate the *survivors* and build teams and networks.

Hear, craft and tell the new company *story*.

Find the 'best of' individuals, teams and the organisations.
Provide time and space for people to meet and connect around mission critical tasks and the future of the new company.

Harness the grapevine and listen to the stories.

establish their reputation and credibility.

having others do 'out of the box' teambuilding and visioning exercises driven by shared culture and values.

relying on the communications machine to do the work.

Implications for leading continuity

Most leaders find they spend a lot of time on 'the soap opera of organisational life'. Clearly, the proportions change over time. When involved in significant changes of direction – such as reconfiguring a manufacturing company towards a more service-oriented approach, in the

midst of an acquisition, or launching a new product to market – a few individuals will find their efforts mainly focused on the 'transformational' agenda. However, unless they are completely removed from line management responsibility, which carries the need to constantly create a sense of meaning and narrative continuity for stakeholders, they will inevitably find themselves engaged in the 'continuity' agendas described above.

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